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ABSTRACT

By law the Mississippi Commission on School Accreditation has the primary responsibility for assuring the quality of elementary and secondary education programs in the state. The Commission finds its role as one of validation and process evaluation according to established procedures. Recently, the state legislature mandated the establishment of local school accountability plans emphasizing good instructional management. As one of its standards, the Commission proposed that by 1984 each school district will have an "Accountability and Instructional Management" (AIM) plan in practice. This forced the Commission to establish a new set of standards for accrediting teams' evaluation of the instructional management program. The Commission faced the problems of establishing final standards, and training visiting teams to implement the standards. Since the selection of content is viewed as a local matter by the law, accreditation must emphasize the quality of each identified objective in the following areas: (1) clarity; (2) its ability to be measured; (3) faculty input in establishing it; (4) developing suitable evaluation procedures to measure it; (5) establishing expected levels of performance for it; and (6) action taken based on obtained data to improve the instructional program. (Author/RL)

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Problems in Evaluating the Process of Product Evaluation: A New Role for School Accreditation

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Background

When one considers the large network of regional and state accreditation agencies which deal with elementary and secondary schools, one is probably looking at the nation's largest user of evaluation procedures. Accreditation has prided itself as the major force in the improvement of public schools. Working with the self study process and using external reviewers in a validation made in terms of stated criteria, accreditation has done much to change the shape of public elementary and secondary schools in America during this century. One could classify their evaluation actions as emphasizing the process of education.

While there is little doubt that the accreditation movement sought to improve the quality of education, it did so by looking for processes and materials that were believed to be associated with quality. While most accreditation agencies had a process standard concerning the presence and use of a well defined course of study by accredited schools, no effort was made to assess the knowledge acquired by students in the instructional program. In addition, too many schools discovered methods of producing the desired documents without actually using them as intended. However, during the sixties, the general public began to lose faith in public schools and in the agencies which accredited them.

If one were seeking to identify the current driving force for improving public schools one could tend to cite the current accountability movement. Ten years ago this month, the Kappan dedicated an entire issue to accountability. Henry Dyer presented a plan he expected to be used in the New York City Schools (1970). In his article he concluded that "school effectiveness indices" had to be created. Myron Lieberman took the opportunity to call for an accountability system which would form a closer tie between cost and educational outcomes (1970).

Donald Robinson stated the view that a quality educational system could not be built on reading and mathematics scores alone (1970). While Robinson did

not approve a simplest form of accountability, he felt that schools must address learner goals and provide evidence of progress and improvement in a school's instructional program. Finally, Stephen Barro presented a multiple regression procedure that could allow one to control some unwanted variance in student test scores, thus improving one's interpretation of the results (1970).

Over the last ten years a wide range of accountability programs has evolved. Often times these plans evoke strong passions from educators. Two of the more noted plans are in Florida (Fisher, 1978; Glass, 1978) and California (Hart, 1978; Wise, 1978). Unfortunately, during the past ten years, few developments have occurred in the area of accreditation to address this area of concern.

Because of this turn from the accreditation process, several states found new boards and agencies being created to also assure the quality of the educational process. This action led to schools finding themselves reporting to several agencies with no one agency leading in the development of this new demand for accountability. In addition, accreditation agencies have been pressured to adopt some minimum competency test as a pre-condition for accountability. The State Board of Regents in New York has adopted a plan that any school with lower than an 85% success ratio on a minimum competency exam selected by the board would be placed on probation. Most accreditation agencies shrink from such plans.

It should be clear that while minimum competency testing plans may not be acceptable, some system of instructional improvement based on student achievement must be developed if accreditation is to take the lead again in assuring the quality of the educational process. In Mississippi the Commission on School Accreditation has adopted a plan which may aid in this process while remaining true to the basic principles of accreditation. In general terms, this plan calls on accredited schools in Mississippi to develop an instructional

improvement system using an annual review of the local instructional program based on student achievement. While this system will use student achievement data, accreditation emphasizes the process and use of this evaluation.

The challenge for the Accreditation Commission will be to establish criteria to judge this process and then train accreditation terms to validate the delivery of the process.

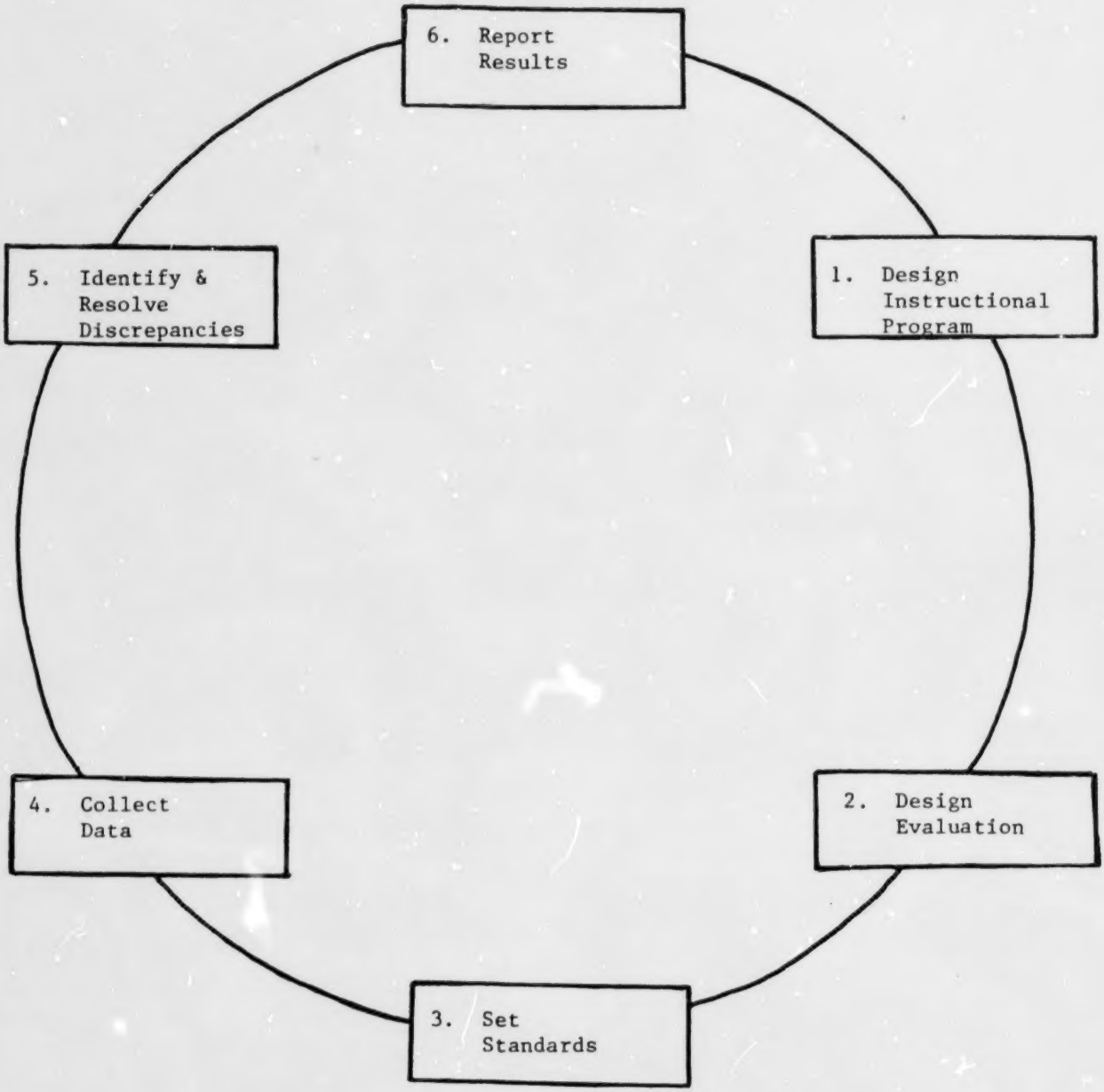
The Plan

The major thrust of the program will be to assure that each year every accredited school conducts its own evaluation of its instructional program according to guidelines developed by the State Department of Education. The program, which is entitled, "AIM for Excellence," is basically a plan in which each accredited school will seek to improve its instructional program annually (1979). The plan, which allows individual schools to maintain control over their instructional programs, is designed to have local input into the program as a major component. It is believed that the local school will be hesitant to make the effort to assure that the program is a success, unless it feels ownership in the program. AIM stands for "Accountability and Instructional Management." The program goes through six basic stages (See Figure 1). While the first two stages may not be totally redone each year, they will be considered for revision if necessary. The plan is not designed to create new programs, but to manage existing programs with an emphasis on program improvement.

The first stage is to develop an AIM plan which would consist of a general design and a more detailed description of the instructional programs in a school. The design is basically an outline of the program which serves as a starting point for developing the complete program. Once the outline is created, one must take the outline and expand it to cover the following three concerns for each component of a program. First, there must be a clear statement of the behavioral objective that the student is expected to master.

Figure 1

Steps in the AIM Plan



This implies that one will write, in measurable terms, what a student will be able to do as a result of participating in a particular component of the instructional program. Second, there needs to be a listing of classroom teachers' activities which could be associated with a particular objective. Such information could aid new teachers in preparing their program. Finally, a listing of all necessary resources must be given to support the teacher of the program. One could not expect a successful program without the proper support.

There is not a single structure for an AIM plan since each school must create a program which reflects what that school feels is most important for its children. The development of this plan should afford the faculty the opportunity to seriously consider the content of the various instructional programs. Should a school wish to identify the sequence of a program and seek to individualize instruction, this can be done. The school board will be expected to review and eventually approve the local school plan.

Once a program has been defined, then an evaluation process must be created. While some educational situations do call for teacher observations of student performance, most situations will require the development of a paper and pencil test to measure the objectives which were identified earlier. If objectives are not clear, further work may be required before evaluation instruments are created. However, a good set of objectives should lead directly to the development of good evaluation instruments. Therefore, at least once a year a school will administer its own evaluation instrument to students in a particular instructional area. Some schools may choose to test on a nine-week or six-week period rather than once a year. No one pattern of collecting evaluative data is identified as best.

After the evaluation instruments are created, standards must be set in terms of student performance. These standards are not minimum competency

standards for passing or failing students but rather standards which represent the expected general performance of students. The faculty already has the authority to make decisions concerning students based on more data than just one or two tests. These standards will aid a school in identifying areas of strengths and weaknesses in the various instructional areas.

After the goals have been established, the evaluation instruments are administered to students and the results are collected. These results are then compared to the established standards. The areas are considered satisfactory when performance is higher than the standards. The area has a discrepancy if the average student's performance is lower than the goal. If schools set goals so no discrepancies exist, they are saying they have no area where improvement is necessary. Conversely, if a larger number of areas of the curriculum are recognized as having discrepancies, the school will have more areas which require work than the school can adequately address. The evaluation is designed to yield a reasonable number of areas in a program which can be the center of attention for improvement during the following year.

The next stage of the program is to plan action to resolve discrepancies in the program. Actually, the plan tends to serve as a yearly needs assessment. At this point, the faculty and administration will define a course of action to resolve this discrepancy. The action could be revamping the original plan or scheduling inservice activities for faculty members in areas where problems are identified. The goal is not to find the villains and blame them, but rather to insure that at least once a year a review of the instructional program is conducted. With the evaluation based on objective data, the program can be improved. If local schools carry out this type of activity, the necessary atmosphere will be present to allow local schools to improve their instructional program and their student performance.

The final stage of the program is to report the results of the program and the plans for improvement to the public. This reporting function was mandated by the State Accountability Law. While a detailed reporting would be too involved, it is envisioned that the reporting function will provide the public with an understanding concerning the direction of a school's instructional program.

The AIM plan offers a systematic approach toward improving instruction in the state. Having a discrepancy in one's program should indicate that a particular area of need has been identified for improvement. The AIM plan is not designed to compare schools, but rather to help schools review themselves in terms of their instructional goals. The presence of an appropriate plan, a set of evaluation instruments based on the objectives of the plan, a set of goals based on the instruments, a systematic collection of data from the evaluation instruments, a plan of action to resolve the discrepancies, and an annual report to the public are the criteria the Commission will use to evaluate a school. The failure to have the above system in order will lead to action by the Commission.

Criticisms

Critics of the AIM plan say that there is no assurance that the programs which are finally developed by the local school will be good programs that address the things students should know. However, to date there have been few instances where educators have been able to agree on what constituted the ideal plan for a subject area. The participation by the faculty in the development of the program and an opportunity for yearly review should lead to a plan which works. Many people will have an opportunity to share their beliefs concerning their subject areas. Given the state of the art, it appears best to leave the decision concerning what is important to the local school. In addition, the plan is a management system for the instruction program, not an instructional

program. The goal of the plan is to improve instruction through education, not to create new programs, unless such action is indicated by the evaluation.

A second criticism is that teachers cannot produce good tests. No doubt one who devotes an entire life to mastering the art of test development will possess superior skills in this area. However, teachers have testing as a daily part of their instruction programs whether it be asking questions to students, designing practical activities, or administering a paper and pencil test on a subject area. If teachers need help in this area, then efforts at inservice education should be begun to teach these skills. Teachers can learn to create good tests which measure their instructional programs. However, it would be hard for accreditation to seek to argue that development of good tests by teachers is not a criterion of a good school. One challenge facing the Accreditation Commission is the development of realistic criteria for the development of evaluative instruments which represent quality but can be accomplished by local school districts. While help in test development must be provided for schools, lack of proficiency in this area is not sufficient justification to negate the plan. Reaching the ultimate goal of high quality evaluation instruments will take time. However, improving the quality of the teacher's skills in test development will have a more valuable impact in the future.

A third criticism is that this program will not allow people to compare schools since all tests will not be common among all schools. One must remember that the AIM plan allows a school to evaluate the effectiveness of its instructional programs. If all schools were to base their programs on one test, it would mean that all schools must adopt one curriculum plan since a test is nothing more than a set of instructional objectives written in a question format. The State of Mississippi will continue to measure a few grades for basic skills achievement using a nationally normed test. However,

these tests will not form the core for local schools' accountability. The plan is to have schools improve their instructional program, not to determine a winner and loser on one test.

A final criticism is that the plan will cause too much paper work and excessively remove teachers from their classes. There is no doubt that, if misused, the AIM plan could be guilty of the above criticism. However, what better activity in which to have teachers involved during inservice than developing and reviewing their instructional programs? In addition, written courses of study are already a requirement of accreditation. The major change in the current standards is that they will be used in the classroom and periodically changed based on the results of the student performance.

Problems in the Evaluative Criteria

Designing and developing an acceptable AIM plan is dependent on the development of the evaluative criteria that will be used by the accreditation teams which visit a school. To date, no such specific criteria have been created, although several discussions concerning criteria have been held. If accreditation were using a product evaluation, one could simply identify the necessary score for success. However, since accreditation is evaluating the process of a school's product evaluation, an entire new set of problems are created.

There is little doubt that criteria could be established which would eliminate most local schools from the accreditation list. At the other extreme, criteria could be established which would be meaningless and allow the AIM plan to have little or no effect on a local school. The challenge must be to establish realistic standards which will make a difference. One should not eliminate the possibility of changing criteria over time as new resources and training are made available to the local schools and they acquire the ability to meet higher standards. Accomplishing such a massive change may require several

stages of refining and upgrading of the criteria for judging the process.

The first area of concern in the criteria must be for the involvement of both faculty and administration in developing the AIM plan. While external resources are encouraged, local schools must develop a feeling of ownership and commitment to use this instructional plan. There will be a strong temptation to have the entire plan created by one or two central office experts or to buy your total plan from a vendor. While schools must seek assistance and support from the wide range of vendors who produce educational products, they remember that the program leadership belongs to them.

A second area of concern will be associated with the documentation of one's AIM plan. While specific requirements for the AIM plan are already stated, one must identify the form in which this information must be maintained. The key will be to allow maximum flexibility in form while assuring the information has been provided. There also must be a quality or adequacy concern for this documentation. While accreditation does not intend to require a long list of specific facts be taught in any one subject area, there will be a need to assure that the plan does describe the instructional system in a clear and comprehensive manner.

A third area of concern, one which tends to frighten and worry most school superintendents, is the development of evaluative procedures. The AIM plan has already stated that a wide range of evaluative procedures can be used by a school, provided they are systematic and address the program objectives. Educators have been given the shock treatment concerning the development of good tests. Some are now convinced that unless millions of dollars can be spent to have "experts" build these tests, the system will fail. No doubt one wants the best talent available, but the taxpayers are not willing to buy all the talents some think are necessary. The goal must be to establish criteria

for evaluative instruments which can be met by the local school through inservice of its faculty. Determining what should be included in these criteria will be a difficult, but not impossible task.

In addition to criteria for the evaluative procedures, one must determine how the procedures will be used. The use of existing test items and examples from external sources is an excellent resource in developing the evaluative procedures. However, there must be more association between the instructional program and the evaluative procedures than simply administering a standardized achievement test at the end of the year, even if it has criterion-referenced scores. Determining what criteria must be established for the use of the evaluative procedures will be difficult. If evaluations are collected too often the sheer weight of the paperwork will break the system. However, the once-a-year plan could prove to have little or no impact on a program.

Finally, there must be a criterion concerning the use of this information. The Commission will be looking at how the resulting data from the evaluative process are used to bring about change in the existing program. The data must lead to action which will relate to staff development activities and programmatic changes. Establishing a criterion for assuring that the evaluation leads to an action of improvement will be the final step.

The above concerns are not simplistic, nor will be the criteria which must be established to address these concerns. However, if accreditation wishes to take the leadership in school improvement, a solution must be found. Evaluators have found how to use the evaluative process in certain limited and unique settings, especially when there is an abundance of financial resources and evaluation talent. The challenge to accreditation is to implement an evaluation plan on a mass basis where neither financial resources nor evaluation talent exists at an adequate level.

Recommendations

The AIM plan assumes that there is no villain in schools, either teacher, administrator, or student. The plan further assumes that the educators are interested in helping students learn. The plan emphasizes local control of the school curriculum as it elevates the importance of the instructional program in the school and calls for systematic management of the plan based on an evaluation using student performance data. More importantly, the plan maintains one unit of control for the assurance of quality in the instructional programs for schools.

No doubt variance will exist in the quality of the programs developed by schools. However, schools will never complete their plans since the constant review and improvement of the instructional programs are annual events. Change in education is slow. No dramatic results will occur over night or even in one year. There is no easy answer nor single test which can be given to students, which will bring about increased achievement by students. However, if managed properly, regional and state accreditation will be able to begin a program of systematic improvement of the instructional programs in schools which will address the public's concern for accountability.

If regional and state accreditation commissions do not develop a policy on accountability, they may find their role of assuring the quality of education in a school usurped by new agencies who base their judgement on some form of minimum competency testing. While many educators could foresee problems this process would produce, it will occur unless the public is presented with a viable alternative. In creating a standard, accreditation must consider what information and/or processes an accredited school should provide a concerned community. It appears that some of these reasonable areas include: (a) a written instructional program, (b) an evaluation in terms of these objectives,

(c) an identification of program areas where student's performance is not as high as would be desired, and (d) plans for reviewing and improving the instructional program. These components form AIM.

Many people have sought to center the issue of accountability on teacher evaluation, promotion and graduation criteria, and other such issues. However, in Mississippi, accountability is directed at the issue of instructional improvement through the presence of instructional management systems in the schools. The problems of promotion criteria and teacher evaluation will be addressed, but not in the role of accountability. Accountability will allow the State Accreditation Commission to continue to be the sole agency for the assurance of quality in the public schools. Such a role for accreditation will allow accountability to be geared at instructional improvement through the self study and validation processes. The critical step will be establishing the evaluative criteria to be used by accreditation to judge plans in local schools. Until this issue is addressed, the entire system is still not on a solid course.

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